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Thoughts on Foreign Language Activity Classes in Japanese Elementary Schools

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the current Foreign Language Activity subject in Japanese elementary schools while giving suggestions to create a smooth link with Foreign Languages education at the junior high school level. The author proposes that elementary school teachers should focus on increasing the intrinsic motivation of their students to learn a foreign language. The paper starts by giving a brief summary of the goals for foreign language related subjects as decided by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology – Japan and their implementation in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classroom teaching. This is followed with a short introduction of two theories of motivation that elementary school teachers may find appropriate to consider in their Foreign Language Activity lessons. After a short discussion regarding the current situation surrounding assistant language teachers, this paper finishes by suggesting several practical ideas for teachers to use in their lessons to inspire their students further to want to become fluent in a foreign language in the future. The implication in this article is that by building a strong affection for English, or other foreign languages, students will be motivated to continue their studies even during difficult times they may have in the years beyond elementary school.

Key words : Foreign Language Activity (外国語活動)
L2 Motivation (L 2 動機づけ)
EFL classroom teaching (英語指導)
Elementary School Education (小学校教育)

Introduction

In March 2008, it was announced by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) that from April 2011, all Japanese public elementary schools would be required to teach the subject Foreign Language Activity (FLA) as part of the curriculum for grades five and six. Matsukawa and Oshiro (2008) explain that this decision was made after many years of research and debate, starting in 1986, when it was declared that there was a need to improve the English education program in Japanese schools. In 1991, it was then announced by MEXT that introducing English education into the elementary school curriculum would be considered. Over the following twenty years, many elementary schools, teachers and researchers worked diligently to develop curricula and resources to meet the needs of FLA. Despite these efforts, many elementary school teachers still feel anxious about their ability to teach foreign languages, even now after FLA has officially been implemented into the curriculum. Even though the name FLA suggests many languages will be instructed,

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the designated text, *EigoNōto* (English Note) is primarily focused on English. Teachers' anxiety lies strongly with lack of confidence in their own English proficiency. However, many are also still unclear to the objectives of FLA, as specified by MEXT.

The overall objectives set by MEXT for each subject taught at elementary school, junior high school and senior high school can be found easily on their web page. These are clearly displayed with the overall objective for FLA in elementary school being :

To form the *foundation* [emphasis added] of pupils' communication abilities through foreign languages while developing the understanding of languages and cultures through various experiences, fostering a positive attitude toward communication, and familiarizing pupils with the sounds and basic expressions of foreign languages. (MEXT, 2010a)

For the subject Foreign Languages at the junior high school level, MEXT's overall objective is :

To develop students' *basic* [emphasis added] communication abilities such as listening, speaking, reading and writing, deepening their understanding of language and culture and fostering a positive attitude toward communication through foreign languages. (MEXT, 2010b)

Finally, at senior high school, MEXT has set the overall objective for Foreign Languages as :

To develop students' communication abilities such as accurately understanding and appropriately conveying information, ideas, etc., deepening their understanding of language and culture, and fostering a positive attitude toward communication through foreign languages. (MEXT, 2010c)

These three goals are similar in terms of the language used. However, one particular area seems to have caused concern among elementary school teachers. This confusion is based around the word *foundation* in the objective for FLA in elementary schools, and *basic* in the objective for junior high school. Although the nuance of these words is quite clear when written in English, many elementary school teachers seem to be unclear when reading the objectives in Japanese, which use the word *soji* for foundation, and *kiso* for basic. The definitions given in dictionaries, such as the Grand Concise Dictionary (Sanseido, 2003), may also add to the confusion with *soji* being defined as, “(*kiso*) a foundation, a ground (work)” (p. 1288) and the definition for *kiso* being, “the foundation: the basis. . . [groundwork]” (p. 531). In order to clarify the differences between the three objectives at elementary school, junior high school and senior high school, ‘building a house’ (figure 1.) can be used as an analogy for understanding MEXT's objectives¹.

Before building a house, it is vital that the land on which the house is to be built is strong and firm. If the land below which supports the house is soft or weak, the entire house will not be sturdy and likely to collapse during bad weather, such as a typhoon. Likewise, FLA classes at elementary school should be focused on building students' positive attitudes toward learning foreign languages, their interest in and appreciation of foreign cultures, as well as the experience of speaking English (or another foreign language) with success. Doing so may support students' motivation to learn the more fundamental parts of language when they reach junior high school.

Junior high school can be compared to the framework of a house. Even though the framework of a house

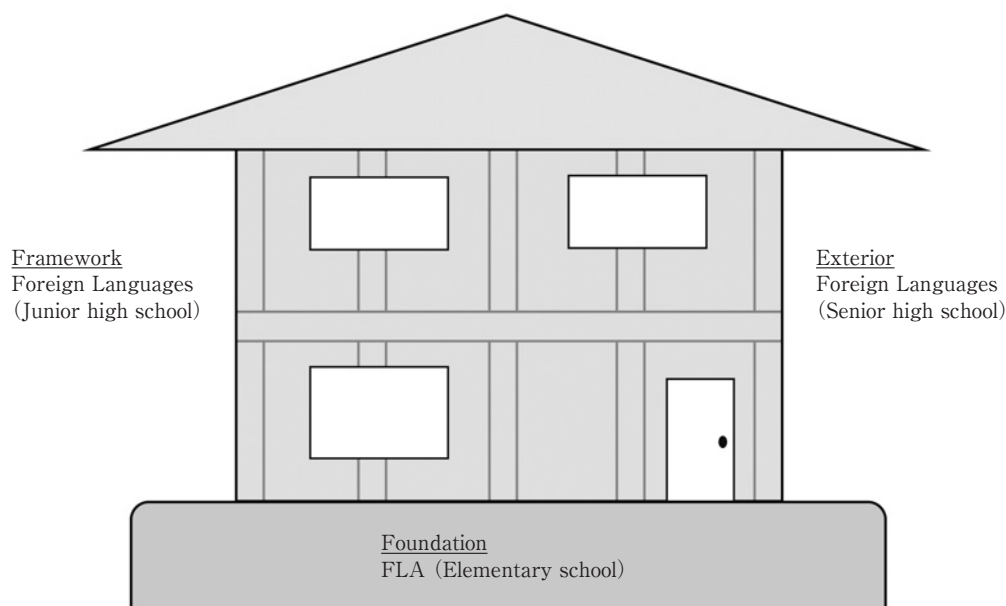


Figure 1. A comparison of building a house with the objectives for FLA and Foreign Languages at elementary school (represented by the land below the house), junior high school (the framework of the house) and senior high school (the exterior).

Figure 1. The House of Foreign Language Instruction.

cannot be seen from the outside, it is at the heart of the home and is what keeps the building together. It is here where teachers should focus their lessons on increasing students' understanding of the basics of language (i.e. grammatical explanations and building students' vocabulary bank). At the senior high school level, which is compared to the exterior of a house in figure 1, students can be given numerous opportunities to express themselves in the foreign language they are studying. This may be done through speaking or writing activities, such as role plays, debating, essay writing, and letter writing to supplement comprehension tasks done in class. The increase of output makes students' language skills more observable, similar to a house's exterior.

The six years of Foreign Language education at junior high school and senior high school can often be highly demanding for students. In order to help students prepare to overcome these difficult times, it is advisable for elementary school teachers to focus on increasing the intrinsic motivation of their students to learn foreign languages. This way, students may find it easier to work hard through the often otherwise dreariness of grammar and vocabulary learning that is often seen at higher levels of learning. This paper will now briefly summarize two theories of motivation and propose how these theories can be put into practice in the FLA classroom.

Motivation

Motivation is perhaps the most commonly used word when explaining whether humans are able to complete a complex task successfully or not. Similarly, many language teachers often put the achievements of their students down to motivation; those who did well were the ones who had more drive to study. There has been a great deal of research done in human learning over the past fifty years showing that motivation is indeed a key factor in learning regardless of the subject (e.g. Weiner, 1986; Deci, 1975; Maslow, 1970). Many

researchers in second language acquisition (e.g. Dörnyei, 2005; Spolsky, 2000; Gardner & Lambert, 1972) have also concentrated on the relationship between motivation and students' success. In this section, two theories of motivation, the Self-determination Theory, and the L2 Motivational Self System will be briefly explained. These explanations will be followed by some suggestions of how these theories can be put into practice in the FLA classroom.

The Self-determination Theory

The Self-determination Theory (SDT) is perhaps the most widely known, and universal of the theories related to motivation. Generally, two categories can be used when evaluating students' motivation from a SDT viewpoint: *intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation*. Language students who are intrinsically motivated are those who study English for the enjoyment of learning, rather than any visible rewards. On the other hand, those who study in order to get measurable return, such as points on exams or financial benefits, can be described as being extrinsically motivated. Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) suggest that a third distinction, *ammotivation*, can be added to this theory to describe students who do not have any motivation at all.

Although many teachers tend to rely on rewards such as stickers to motivate their students to study, this method does not bring the long-term benefits that teaching to increase students' intrinsic motivation may. Paul (2008) suggests that such extrinsic rewards in fact weaken students' interest in learning. Students may get bored with the rewards given to them, causing the teacher to think about more exciting rewards, putting the focus for both teacher and student on the reward itself, rather than the lesson. Paul continues to argue that a second problem lies in the question of who to give the rewards to. Many teachers seem to just give rewards to those students who get the correct answer. However, there are often cases of students who don't try very hard, but happen to get the right answer, and students who try very hard, but don't get the right answer. In such a case, giving rewards just to the student who gets the correct answer may result in other students becoming disheartened. It is necessary for teachers, therefore, to think whether the reward should be given to those who come up with the correct answer, or those who make the effort. As a result of these considerations, teachers may concentrate their time and effort on rewards rather than the lesson and increasing the intrinsic motivation of their students.

By focusing on increasing the intrinsic motivation of students, or their love of learning in an EFL environment, teachers are able to help them prepare for long-term learning. Intrinsic motivation comes from inside the student. Therefore, "a person might be motivated by the enjoyment of the learning process itself or by a desire to make themselves feel better (Harmer, 2007, p. 98)." This can be achieved by giving students the opportunity to guide their own learning and the chance to learn and create new things (Pink, 2009). It is generally agreed that students who are intrinsically motivated yield the best long-term results. Therefore, it is beneficial for teachers to consider this when preparing their FLA classes. One way of doing this is to help students create an image of themselves speaking an L2 (second language) successfully. This then bring us to the L2 Motivational Self System.

L2 Motivational Self System

Inspired by the work of Gardner (1985) and Markus and Nurius (1986), the L2 Motivational Self System was proposed by Dörnyei (2005). Gardner (1985) argued that for students to be motivated to increase their L2 proficiency, it is important for them to have a desire to be closer to the L2 community. Markus and Nurius (1986) proposed that humans' motivation comes from a balance of increasing the distance between their current

self and feared self (e.g. becoming homeless), and shrinking the gap between their current self and their future ideal selves (e.g. becoming rich and successful). Combining these two ideas, Dörnyei (2005) recommends that in an EFL environment, highly motivated students will be those who work to come closer to realizing the ideal image or dream of themselves speaking the L2 fluently, while making equal efforts to move away from the possibility of the imagined feared L2 self, such as failure to communicate in the L2 (for an overview of the L2 Motivational Self System, see Dörnyei, 2009).

The L2 Motivational Self System has been supported by several researches. In a study comparing the L2 Motivational Self of students in three Asian nations (i.e. Japan, China and Iran), Taguchi, Magid and Papi (2009) suggested that Japanese feel they must study English to increase their opportunity for employment. At the same time, however, their ideal English self has a very weak link with their image of being successful professionally. This suggests that Japanese may tend to focus their study of foreign languages on being successful for university entrance exams, rather than for communication with people from other countries. Leis, Suzuki and Ando (2011), basing their research on the L2 Motivational Self System, reported that there seems to be a distinct relationship between students who had a clear ideal image of themselves using English successfully and those who had high confidence in using the English language.

SDT and the L2 Motivational Self System show that students' success can often be related to the drive that comes from within the students themselves. Thus language instructors need to be aware of this and design FLA lessons to nurture the intrinsic motivation and ideal L2 self-image students have. This can be done in several ways.

- *Use Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) to introduce foreign cultures.* If the ALT is from abroad, or has spent several years abroad, he/she will often be able to show images of events or festivals from that country. Having a teacher who has personally experienced the event possibly increases the authenticity of the activity for students.
- *Make magazines, pictures or picture books from abroad easily available for students.* Here, it is important that teachers do not force the students to look at material, but make the objects attractive to students so they will become interested and make the decision to browse through the material themselves.
- *Participate actively in FLA classes.* The language instructor needs to be a good role model for students. Dörnyei and Csizér (1998) list "set a personal example with your own behavior" (p. 215) as the first of their ten commandments for motivating language learners. Teachers have an enormous effect on students through their behavior both in and out of the classroom. Teachers can show students that they are prepared to try speaking foreign languages without being concerned about grammatical errors or pronunciation difficulties. As a result, students may also appreciate this and follow in the steps of their teacher, making similar efforts.
- *Use media from the Internet to show videos from abroad.* Using video material may assist to make the students' image and understanding of foreign cultures. Such media can be used even in the absence of the ALT and can be used to introduce languages and lifestyles of cultures that the ALT has not experienced.

These ideas focus on increasing the interest of foreign cultures for students. This in turn, may result in students wanting to learn more about those cultures, thus enhancing students' intrinsic motivation and ideal L2 self-image. For more ideas on motivating students, see Dörnyei, 2001.

ALTs

ALTs are usually native speakers of English, or have lived abroad for several years and speak English fluently. Many elementary schools are visited regularly by ALTs. These assistant teachers can provide students with the opportunity to experience the culture of a foreign country first hand as well as hearing the words spoken by someone who is fluent in the language. Having an ALT in the classroom also allows students the possibility of successfully having a conversation with a person from abroad, thus increasing possibility of higher self-confidence in students while creating a clearer image of themselves speaking English with a native or near-native speaker. However, there seem to be some problems with ALTs and their relationship with Japanese teachers in the classroom.

Ohtani (2010) suggests that many ALTs' input is not appreciated when planning lessons due to Japanese teachers' lack of communication. On the other hand, many Japanese teachers feel that some ALTs are not motivated to teach. Although this miscommunication may not be on purpose, it does cause problems in FLA classes. Therefore, it is necessary to consider some ideas to make the best use of ALTs in a way that will increase the intrinsic motivation of students in FLA classes as well as helping make the image of themselves using foreign languages fluently clearer for students. This can be done by asking ALTs to help prepare material to increase students' motivation as mentioned in the previous section. ALTs may also create videos or DVDs based on situations being practiced in class. Such videos can show students English being used in a natural environment and, when humor is added, can increase the enjoyment of FLA classes. Finally, I suggest that ALTs from abroad be encouraged to study Japanese and use these skills with students at not only elementary school, but also junior and senior high school. By setting an example through their own attitude to studying a foreign language, ALTs may help increase the motivation of students. When ALTs are prepared to use their Japanese skills at certain times during school activities or even in the classroom, students may feel less nervous and more comfortable communicating with a person from a non-Japanese speaking background. As a result, ALTs can become what I will coin AMTs (Assistant Motivating Teachers). Consequently, their involvement in FLA classes, and the entire school environment can become even more purposeful and effective.

Conclusion

Despite close to 25 years of preparation, research and testing, FLA is still in the very early period of practice in the classroom. Many elementary school teachers, including those who have been given the task of conducting FLA lessons, are still not entirely clear regarding the objectives of FLA, and their link with junior high school and beyond. This paper has recommended that FLA classes should focus on increasing the intrinsic motivation of students, generating an interest in foreign cultures and a love of learning foreign languages. When such an attitude can be reared in students, they will be better prepared for more linguistic-based instruction in junior and senior high school, especially at times when they find language learning difficult and begin to lose self-confidence. Intrinsic motivation in students can be impacted positively by various media, such as the Internet, videos, pictures and magazines that can be made even more authentic when they are created and collected with the help of an ALT. Such activities, in combination with a positive attitude toward foreign languages, culture and people by FLA teachers and ALTs, may increase the enjoyment of FLA classes and in turn improve students' proficiency of foreign languages, especially English, for generations to come.

Notes

1. A similar analogy was proposed by Kan (2009), comparing the three levels of education to a garden bed. Elementary school teachers need to make the soil healthy and plant seeds (students' feelings and attitudes toward foreign languages), while junior and senior high school teachers have the responsibility to water the garden, producing flowers and fruit (genuine English language skills).

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